EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY IMITATIONS OF SPENSER

BY

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A.B., University of Illinois, 1933

A.M., University of Illinois, 1934

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN
ENGLISH IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF
THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS, 1941

URBANA, ILLINOIS

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Although by no means rare are critical comments on those eighteenth-century poems which copy or approximate the stanza, the diction, the imagery, and the mannerisms of Spenser, there exists no previous study in which more than one-fourth of the imitative poems are considered. Moreover, there exists none which attempts to show the relationship of those poems to the usual practice of imitation in the century, and there exists none which attempts to combine the evidence presented by those poems with other evidence serving to give us a clear understanding of the attitude of the century toward one of the greatest of the Elizabethans.

The purposes with which the dissertation was begun may be summarized as follows:

1. To construct as complete as possible a list of Spenserian imitations in the century, supplementing Professor Phelps's enumeration of fifty-seven poems, the most comprehensive list in print.
2. To discover why Spenser was imitated.
3. To find how the imitations were received.
4. To study the general subject of imitation in the century, and to discover how nearly the Spenserian imitations conform to the common practice.
5. After the above findings have been made, to combine them with the previously known facts concerning Spenser's reception in the century, and thus to present a more specific statement of the prevalent attitude toward Spenser.
6. To determine as nearly as possible the influence of Spenser and his imitators upon the eighteenth-century growth of romanticism.

The study required a considerable amount of reading in eighteenth-century poetry. About forty different anthologies containing minor poetry of the period were consulted, as well as the poetical sections of fifteen different sets of periodicals and the individual works of approximately one hundred and

fifty major and minor poets. In addition, the investigation of the reasons for writing involved a study of the life and the other works of each imitator concerning whom facts were obtainable, and the examination of the reception of the poems entailed the reading of numerous reviews and other critical comments. Finally, the study of the general subject of imitation necessitated further reference to numerous periodicals and to various books on taste, genius, and educational theory.

The list of Spenserian imitations finally obtained includes a total of two hundred and twenty-five works. Although no statistics concerning numbers of imitations of other authors are available, my own reading leads me to believe that only Horace and Milton were imitated in more poems, despite the fact that Anacreon, Swift, Prior, Gray, and Shenstone—to name only a few—were also very popular models.

The imitations of Spenser were, on the whole, well received, although the majority of critics objected to the use of archaisms—objected to "a modern poem with a glossary at its tail." The *Monthly Review*, after praising some of the imitative poems of the 1750's, gradually altered its position to one of hostility to any poems reminiscent of Spenser, particularly if they contained obsolete diction, and then swung back once more to approval of such works. Other periodicals pursued no particular policy, but usually found something praiseworthy in each of the imitations. The stanza of Spenser was commended by critics more frequently than not, the full-length portraits of abstractions were approved, the moral teaching was admired, and evidences of "fancy" were praised.

The study has indicated that Spenser was somewhat better known and better liked *throughout* the eighteenth century than has been generally recognized. Although Shakspere and Milton were fairly familiar names to more people than had even heard of Spenser, numerous allusions to the latter by men and women who were not scholars, poets, or antiquarians indicate that his work was known to many. Spenser was almost never regarded as antithetical to Pope or to Dryden or to others of the neo-classicists. As Dryden, Pope, Addison, and

Prior had recognized no such antithesis between themselves and the Elizabethan—had, indeed, frequently admitted their love for and debt to him—, it was unlikely that their followers would see any opposition between them; and, as a matter of fact, a whole host of references, in which Spenser and Pope or other neo-classic idols are put side by side, indicates that they did not. Most of the articulate literary-minded ones of the period believed that both Spenser and Pope were great, each in a different form of poetry, and they saw no hostility between the two forms. In other words, the frequently mentioned turning away from Pope and toward Spenser was really non-existent.

Most of the imitations are not good poetry; the "good" poems can be numbered on the fingers of one hand: Shenstone's "Schoolmistress," William Thompson's "Hymn to May," James Thomson's "Castle of Indolence," and Beattie's "Minstrel." Burns's "Cotter," despite its reputation, is disappointing in execution when it is looked at objectively; Coleridge's imitations are trivia; Wordsworth's "Female Vagrant" is certainly not one of his best poems. Most of the other poems are too slavish, too superficial, too badly marred by an unholy combination of archaisms and neo-classical clichés, or too obviously and too unpleasantly didactic. They are, however, generally serious works, despite the usual belief that, as Saintsbury expressed it, "Spenserian imitation was at least half burlesque." Only about thirty of the entire group of poems can be considered as comic or satirical, or as written with the intention of being comic or satirical. Most of the works are on subjects of some gravity; for example, Thomas Denton chose to write on immortality, Anna Seward on knowledge, James Scott on Heaven, Burns on the prospect of death, Lamb on repentance, and Richard Polwhele on an explanation of a phase of associational psychology.

The reasons why Spenser was imitated so frequently are several. The first, and probably the most important, is that the eighteenth century was an age of Imitation, the century with the trademark "In the manner of" on the labels of a tre-

mendous number of poems, the century when every schoolboy was taught to imitate Horace and Addison, the century when to copy a phrase or an idea or a style was not reprehensible, but praiseworthy. A considerable amount of criticism was written to demonstrate the necessity and the desirability of imitating. Spenser, as one of the English classics, would inevitably be imitated, for what the eighteenth-century poet or poetaster admired, he was very likely to try to copy. And, once Spenser had been imitated a few times, he would continue to be imitated, both because his poetry was enjoyed and because other writers had copied it—so that a few of the imitations, such as Henry Mackenzie's Shenstone-inspired "Old Maid" and "Old Batchelor," are definitely at a remove.

The general admiration of Spenser afforded the second chief reason for imitating him. Had he been little liked, he would have been little imitated; he would, in fact, have been ignored, as Marlowe and Drayton and Breton were ignored by most people who were not antiquarians. But since the great ones of the Anne era knew him and placed him high among their poetical favorites—even though some of them bemoaned his being led astray by Ariosto—, they considered him to be as worthy of being copied as any other of their idols. And since his popularity did not decline during the century, he was still considered worthy of being copied in 1750, 1775, and 1800. By 1750, the general practice of imitation was reaching its peak (in numbers), and the imitations of Spenser were reaching a temporary peak; by 1775, the general practice was beginning to show a decline, although imitations of Spenser were still very frequent because of the similarity of Spenser's poetry and other forms of literature then becoming popular; and by 1800, although not nearly so many imitative poems were being written, more imitations of Spenser were appearing than had been printed at any earlier time. The typical attitude of most of the imitators—and of their literary-minded contemporaries —was that of William Thompson, who considered Spenser a poet of *nearly* the highest rank, a poet with whom it was very easy to fall in love. But despite his admiration of Spenser,

Thompson did not rebel against the poetry of Pope, he continued to appreciate the poets of his own age, and he referred to both Spenser and Pope as his early teachers.

It is certainly true, too, that some of the imitations resulted from nothing more laudable or damnable than a liking for old words and a desire to play with them. Mark Akenside's boyish "Virtuoso" is an example of this kind—filled with an amazing collection of *wight's* and *hight's* and *wot's* and verbs ending in *-en*. Many authors of the eighteenth century obviously enjoyed playing with the language; as Jespersen has pointed out, the tendency to divert ourselves or others by using nonsensical or semi-nonsensical expressions is strong in all of us. Silly though it generally was, the use of old words would itself, however, serve to focus attention upon unusual, colorful, effective diction. Professor Havens has expressed it thus in his *Influence of Milton*: "English poetry from Pope to Keats shows a steadily increasing attention to the connotative, the imaginative and poetical, value of words, a change that is due largely to the influence of Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton."

The remaining reasons for imitating Spenser bring us a little nearer to romanticism. But one important point must be borne in mind: in *not one* of the imitations is there a voiced protest against neo-classicism or the things for which neo-classicism stood. In not one of them is there an assertion or a hint that the poetry of Spenser and that of Pope are antithetical; in not one of them is there raised a rebellious voice against the heroic couplet, or triteness of diction, or the use of the general for the specific. The imitators sought in Spenser no extremes; they usually stayed conscientiously away from his extremes. Anyone who calls them "romantic rebels," as, for example, Thomas Quayle does in his *Poetic Diction,* is badly mistaken.

However, even though no imitator copied Spenser for the sake of shouting, "Down with the new! Up with the old!" it is noteworthy that about two thirds of the imitations are the work of young men—of men below thirty. For example, Croxall's first three imitations were written when he was in his

early twenties, Akenside's "Virtuoso" appeared when he was sixteen, Thompson's first imitation was written when he was about twenty-four, Robert Lloyd's "Progress of Envy" was composed when the author was eighteen, the Rowley poems—at least strongly influenced by Spenser—were written, of course, when Chatterton was only in his 'teens, Dermody's verses appeared when the Irishman of unfulfilled promise was only in his early twenties, and quite a few of the other imitations were productions of their authors' college days. Although there are questions of authorship and dating of some of the poems, it seems probable that, in all, between 140 and 150 of the imitations were written when their authors were below thirty. This fact may be of some significance as an indication that young men, probably vaguely, felt that something was lacking in the precise, concise verse which had served as their most considerable poetic nutriment; some of them may have realized that the poetry which the followers of Bysshe considered perfect was not really so, that perfection and stagnation would indeed be synonymous, and that a poet must reach always onward and outward. Or the fact may mean only that young men, possessed of the love of variety, desired to experiment, to be different for the sake of being different. Noteworthy, too, is the fact that most of the imitators did not repeat their experiments when they were older; well over half of them were imitators of Spenser in a single poem. Once they had passed youth, if they continued writing poetry, they usually reverted to verse which was somewhat more conservative. In fact, one of them, Hugh Downman, recast his Spenserian imitation in heroic couplets.

Probably, then, young poets were sometimes dimly conscious of the restrictions of neo-classical poetry, and wished to experiment—not to revolt, but to experiment—to see whether there existed a kind of poetry which would more nearly reach the standards of what they believed poetry should be. Experimentation might take any one of three forms: striking out alone, with a nearly complete disregard for what had been done before—as exemplified by the poetry of

Blake; following "nature" rather than earlier poetic interpretations of nature—as Thomson tried to do in the "Seasons" and Dyer in "Grongar Hill" and Burns in most of his poetry; or copying earlier poets whose verse was recognized as somewhat different from that of Pope and his fellows. Since the age was an age of Imitation, the young poets were most likely to experiment in the third of these ways. Spenser was a logical model to follow, for much in Spenser was different from the poetry of the neo-classicists. In imitating Spenser they could use a verse form different from the heroic couplet; they could, moreover, increase the range of their subject matter, for in imitating Spenser they could be gently fanciful, richly descriptive, mildly satirical, or calmly philosophic; they could, finally, teach with slightly less obvious preaching, teach by telling a story, as, for example, did Denton in his "House of Superstition," Mickle in his "Sir Martyn," and Cowper in his "Anti-Thelyphthora." As Leslie Stephen long ago pointed out in his *English Thought*, "the poets of the eighteenth century, with one or two exceptions, show a disposition to edge away from the types which they professed to admit as ideally correct."

Spenser contributed much to this edging away, and not merely by leading writers to imitate his verse. As Milton helped to popularize blank verse and the octosyllabic couplet, so Spenser helped to popularize stanza forms. Stanzaic popularity increased so rapidly, in fact, that in 1770 over sixty per cent of the poems in Pearch's four-volume supplement to Dodsley's miscellany were in some stanza form, and less than twenty per cent in the heroic couplet. Exactly what part of this popularity is attributable to Spenser is, of course, impossible to determine, but it is certain that he was both directly and indirectly an important contributory factor. As he was read more and more, additional readers and writers saw greater beauty in his verse than they had suspected was there, and many of them were led to imitate him or to experiment with verse forms of their own. Others, who had no first-hand acquaintance with his poetry, found reflections of it in the imi-

tations or in poems (by such men as Gray and Collins) influenced by the *Faerie Queene.* Inevitably, the direct and indirect influence of Spenser assisted in the trend toward different verse forms.

As early as 1728, nearly a hundred years before Lamb dubbed him "the poet's poet," the statement was made that Spenser was responsible for more poets than all other English writers combined, and the statement was repeated in varied form several times in the mid-part of the century. Eighteenth-century realization of the fact that Spenser was an important source of poetic inspiration is not surprising, for the influence of Spenser was noticeable not only in verse forms, but also in various more subtle ways. Most full-length portraits of abstractions, such as one finds in Collins, are patently copied after him. For more musical verse, he must be given partial credit; for somewhat less hackneyed "images," he deserves thanks. Archaic words, for the use of which he was largely responsible, color literally hundreds of poems. The increasing interest in the past, although he alone was by no means responsible for it, he at least contributed to; for example, Fosbroke, the author of a poem on medieval monastic life, thought the Spenserian stanza the logical medium for explaining the daily routine of the monks, and it was Spenser whom Hurd emphasized in his *Letters on Chivalry and Romance.*

Indirectly, too, through his imitators, Spenser contributed to the characteristics of romanticism. We are prone to overlook the fact that Spenser's influence upon the nineteenth-century romantics was indirect as well as direct. That is, the eighteenth-century writers whom he affected, in turn influenced their poetic progeny, so that Spenser, like Milton, had a double opportunity to shape the characteristics of romanticism. Wordsworth, for example, knew Spenser's poems, but he was affected also by Thomson's and Beattie's imitations; he chose, in fact, to write (in Spenserian stanzas) a poem called "Stanzas, written in my Pocket Copy of Thomson's Castle of Indolence," and in his youth he had liked to identify himself with the Edwin of Beattie's "Minstrel." Keats, whom

we always associate with Spenser, apparently did not read the works of the Elizabethan until he was nearly eighteen; some of his earlier poetic food had come from "The Castle of Indolence," "The Schoolmistress," "The Minstrel," and possibly (although not probably) Mary Tighe's "Psyche." Byron's use of the Spenserian stanza, the foreword of "Childe Harold" tells us, resulted not from a love of Spenser, but from his admiration of the stanza in the hands of Thomson and Beattie. An eighteenth-century imitator, Thomas Blacklock, introduced Scott to the works of Spenser, as the autobiography in Lockhart's *Life* informs us; but Scott knew the echoes of Spenser as well as the actual music: on the shelves of the library at Abbotsford were the poems of Thomson, Prior, Akenside, Mason, Bedingfield, Shenstone, Blacklock, Beattie, Polwhele, Armstrong, Mickle, William Thompson, Wilkie, Mackenzie, Boyd, and still other imitators. To these few examples of the effect of the imitators upon the great romantics might be added numerous others. It seems clear, therefore, that the eighteenth-century imitators of Spenser played a notable direct role in nineteenth-century romanticism.

Whether Spenser's influence on eighteenth-century romanticism and nineteenth-century romanticism was of greater or of less importance than that of Shakspere or Milton is, however, only debatable and, indeed, almost inconsequential. The significant thing is that Spenser's influence throughout the eighteenth century was real and vigorous, a force which made itself felt in many forms and myriad places. It was one of the contributing factors in the romantic movement, a movement in which every factor was important.

When we combine the various items of information here presented, we discover a curous paradox. On the one hand, the numerous poems copying Spenser are illustrations of imitation, which is usually considered a neo-classic ideal opposed to romantic originality; they were unquestionably outgrowths of a well-established custom of imitating that which was approved. On the other hand, without a doubt they contributed to the increase in romanticism, for they had an effect upon

both verse forms and subject matter. We have, therefore, the apparent contradiction of neo-classicism assisting the rise of romanticism, or rather, of a phase of romanticism growing out of a phase of neo-classicism.

The contradiction, however, is less direct than it seems. For one thing, we need to remember the continuity of romanticism, to remember that it was not born in the sixteenth century, did not die in the seventeenth or the eighteenth, and was not reborn in the nineteenth. It was very much alive throughout the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. Although imitation was not itself romantic, imitation of romantic models was. Even though an imitator copying Spenser penned his lines in the same manner in which he copied Horace, and saw no essential difference in the two procedures, there was a subtle difference because of the mere fact that the models were different. Copying Spenser would color his diction, his verse form, and his subject matter in a way that copying Horace could not. In other words, there was romanticism in some neo-classicism, although the neo-classicists were unaware of it. For another thing, even though imitation is correctly considered essentially neo-classical, it is wrong to assume that the romanticists themselves did not resort to imitation, even on a few rare occasions as slavish as that of any of their predecessors. Coleridge, for instance, wrote not only a pair of Spenserian imitations, but also poems "in the manner of" Anacreon, Catullus, Casimir, Ossian, Akenside, Stolbey, and Schiller, and once planned "2 Satires in the manner of Donne" and two volumes of "Imitations of the Modern Latin Poets." Leigh Hunt and Southey wrote numerous imitative poems, especially in their youth. Others of the romantics wrote fewer imitative poems, but enough to show that they did not consider imitation incompatible with their poetic ideology. It is not so surprising, then, that a phase of romanticism grew from the neo-classical practice of imitation. Such growth furnishes another example to illustrate the now aging but still necessary warning that neo-classicism and romanticism are not opposed, but indeed frequently overlap.

VITA

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